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# THE SEWANEE REVIEW

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## MR. STEPHEN PHILLIPS AS A POET

One reads Mr. Stephen Phillips's latest poems — *Pietro of Siena*, and *The New Inferno* — with a renewed sense of disappointment that there should be such a discrepancy between the promise of the author's youth and the performance of his maturity. His early efforts were greeted with extraordinarily high acclaim, his career was watched with universal expectancy. The *Christ in Hades*, published in 1896 — his first notable poem, riveted the attention of literary men throughout the English-speaking world. Indeed, so great was the success of this poem that Mr. Phillips was encouraged to devote himself exclusively to literature, with the result that a few months later he published a volume of miscellaneous poems — among them the faultlessly beautiful *Marpessa*. This volume was awarded the premium of one hundred guineas offered by the proprietors of *The Academy* to the writer who should make "the most important contribution to the literature of 1897." The critics, as well as his fellow-craftsmen, now hailed him as a poet of royal poetic endowment. From continent to continent flashed the enthusiastic hope that a supremely gifted poet had come to take up the sceptre so recently fallen from the fingers of England's great laureate. Mr. Phillips was promptly commissioned by Mr. Alexander to write a drama, and as a result of this timely stimulus *Paolo and Francesca* was written during the following year and was printed in 1899. The beauty and power of this drama surprised his most expectant admirers; and even critics who had been lukewarm or sceptical hitherto, made haste to welcome

him as one among the authentic poets of the world. Mr. Phillips was still young — thirty-one years of age. His progress had not only been swift and startling; it had been even and consistent. There was about all that he did a certain dignity, gravity, and elevation that augured well for steady growth and increasing ripeness and splendor of creative effort.

So it is not strange that exciting — even extravagant — prophecies were made for him. The finest critics of England and America mentioned Sophocles and Shakespeare, Dante and Milton and Tennyson in connection with his name. One critic wrote: "*Marpessa* has almost Shakespearean tenderness and beauty." Said Mr. William Watson: "He has demonstrated what I should hardly have thought demonstrable — that another poem can be finer than *Christ in Hades*." The comment of the critic in *Literature* was: "His blank verse is entirely his own, everywhere dignified, sonorous, and musical. No man in our generation, and few in any generation, have written better than this." When *Paola and Francesca* was published Mr. Richard Le Gallienne wrote: "It would be impossible to exaggerate one's gratitude to Mr. Phillips for this priceless gift of new beauty." Mr. William Archer affirmed that "Sardou could not have ordered the action more skillfully, Tennyson could not have clothed the passion in words of purer loveliness." Mr. Churton Collins said: "It unquestionably places Mr. Phillips in the first rank of modern dramatists and of modern poetry. It does more, it claims his kinship with the aristocrats of his art; with Sophocles and Dante;" and Mr. Sidney Colvin confesses that "Apprehension lest a modern hand should be found once more merely fumbling with the theme of Dante gives way, as one reads, to pleasure and surprise, that the theme should be capable of being re-handled so nobly and strikingly."

In *Herod*, the poet's next production, there was falling off neither in poetic achievement on his part, nor of approval on the part of the public. *Herod* is a really great tragedy — as well adapted to the stage as to the gratification of the private reader. For a hundred nights it was presented in Her Majesty's Theatre, London, by Mr. Beerbohm Tree. The critics made no reservation as to Mr. Phillips's title to the name of a great

dramatist as well as of a great poet. Structurally adequate, swift, passionate, boldly imaginative, and phrased in majestic verse so flexible and melodious as to suggest comparison with the blank verse of Marlowe and Shakespeare, it was impossible that this production should not excite in the minds of English-speaking people everywhere proud and gratifying hopes for the future of English drama.

The hand that wrote *The Sin of David* had by no means lost its cunning. The action runs fiery hot from the first line to the last, and every line is palpitant with passion and with fate. The drama is constructed with great skill; there is undeviating force and directness of diction; rare art in contrast and foreshadowing. And, notwithstanding the grim retributive note that dominates the poem throughout, upon the whole he has set the seal of romantic beauty, too. He has unlocked to us alike the loveliness and the sorrow of frail mortality. There is mingled intensity and austerity of treatment. It is more ethical than Mr. Phillips's poems are wont to be; and "in its sharp criticism of negative and prohibitive morality it is in accord with deep currents of popular and learned thought."

In *Nero* there are fewer thrilling and memorable lines than in *The Sin of David*; fewer sustained imaginative passages; a less steady flame of passion. In the parting words of Agrippina to Nero the poet does catch for a moment the ultimate secret of poetry. Here, without apparent effort, he effects an instantaneous union of passion and imagination with the most simple and satisfying phrase—invokes a magic rhythm, too, that chimes on the ear and strikes the heart like an echo of the faultless modulations of classic verse. On the other hand, the closing passage of the drama, where Nero surveys the red ruin that licks up Rome, is weak and disappointing. The really notable achievement in this poem, though, is the author's serious and masterful study of the artistic temperament when divorced from all moral restraint. "*Nero* is a searching analysis of the artist nature, uncovering its most secret sores, and that with power."

But from the time that *Herod* was written until the present—a full decade now—the poet's powers have declined. Since 1900, in the dramas already mentioned, and in the lyrics that

have appeared from time to time, he has given us much that is strong and beautiful — much that lifts and stirs and enthrals — but he has not succeeded in assuming again the imperial purple of song; infinity but rarely broods upon his pen. And, though there is a vast difference of poetic quality between the drama *Pietro of Siena* and the blank verse poem *The New Inferno*, there is little to indicate that he has retaken or can retake his first fine poetic rapture. As to achieving new and higher strains — apparently quite out of him!

*Pietro of Siena*,<sup>1</sup> his latest drama, is picturesque and swift, and highly condensed. There are words and lines that burn with pure poetic fire; and in Luigi's soliloquy at dawn, in the last act, there is imagery, emotion, and unforced grandeur of expression that recall Lord Byron at his best — in the sunset speech of Manfred; — but these are for the most part echoes of his earlier work. Not once does he, as of old, by the sudden release of a surcharged epithet or phrase or image, electrify the reader's mind. He opens no new vistas of thought, presents no spiritual visions. His verse does not avail to "tease us out of thought as doth eternity." His earlier poetry moves perilously near the border line that separates the sensuous from the sensual. But this drama seems steeped in a carnal atmosphere. He has put off his sky-robcs for the rank weeds of earth. One can but admire the swiftness and concentration of the drama. There is no change of scene from the City of Siena, and the action runs its course between sunset and sunrise. But how weak the characters! How inadequate the analysis and presentation of motive! And how repellent the predominant fleshliness of the whole drama!

In his latest work, *The New Inferno*,<sup>2</sup> there are hopeful intimations that Mr. Phillips may yet recover in some degree his early greatness. It is a connected and serious piece of work. There is encouragement in the fact that he seems to have been pondering, however inadequately, ethical and religious themes. The poem is written in the same solemn, slow-moving blank verse that has characterized all Mr. Phillips's longer poems,

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<sup>1</sup> Macmillan & Co. 1910.

<sup>2</sup> John Lane & Co. 1910.

though at no time does it match the best work of his earlier days. Sometimes the fires of inspiration die down; more than once the line even deteriorates into plain prose. In the second canto the picture of the spectral Napoleon, marshalling his dead captains and armies in "a world of falling snow and glittering ice" that "reflects the cold splendor of his dreams," is thrillingly beautiful. In many passages there is noble, memorable imagery, and finely-modulated, rich-flowing verse; but never do his lines expand and palpitate in response to some inward prophetic vision, or some pained, passionate cry of inner conviction. *The New Inferno* does not convince the intellect—for in this poem Mr. Phillips speculates concerning the future life. Where his philosophy is not trite it is half fatalistic and half spiritualistic, and wholly unattractive. I will not dispute—surely no alert person will—that, whatever my condition after death, it will be

"Climate and atmosphere of my own soul;"

that

"The spirit its own scenery creates."

Nor are there many men of this generation who will demur from the statement that there is

"A worse hell than by the priests designed."

But not until we receive from behind the veil some word from the spirit of William James—picked phrase, James's every word (or a like message from some other departed spirit equally wise and credible)—is it likely that men and women will accept Mr. Phillips's ghoulish and repulsive doctrine that the unquenched lusts and appetites of men long dead shall enter into these mortal bodies of ours to coerce our wills and make lecherous and drunken victims of us.

"Some flaw o' the stuff" seems to preclude the supreme achievement which the poet's youth foreshadowed. The vessel was apparently too frail for the rich wine of life and song that was poured into it. But let us not yet affirm that the golden bowl is broken. After all, should we so much grieve for what is not, as take account of and anew enjoy what is? Limited a sit is, is not Mr. Phillips's actual and secure achievement sufficient

to gild the dying days of a great poetic century with a glory akin to that which Wordsworth and Coleridge threw across its morning hills? He has at least shown that the heritage of great song has not yet passed away from the English people. Has not the world of art been incalculably enriched with *Marpessa* and *Paola and Francesca*, *Herod*, and *The Sin of David*? He did "put on the glory" then. His reach equalled his grasp, and both reach and grasp were masterful.

It is my own seasoned conviction that *Paola and Francesca* is the most perfect product of Mr. Phillips's genius; and, that we may the better cheer ourselves with the assurance that the gift of poetry still lingers among us of the English tongue in undiminished splendor, and that we may at the same time encourage the poet from whom we have enjoyed and expected so much, I propose to submit this single production to a more formal appreciative test than I have been able to apply to any of his other works.

It was, to be sure, a daring thing for a young poet at the close of the nineteenth century to fix upon a story that had already wooed to its telling hands among the most cunning that ever fashioned sorrow into song. Nor was it less audacious to select as a vehicle of expression for this familiar tragedy a form of verse that would necessarily challenge comparison with some of the sweetest and stateliest poems in the language. But the passion of love is simple and primitive; it never grows old. It is never outworn. It is still fresh and sweet with the dew of Paradise, and will be new and potent so long as there are hearts impelled to love and hearts made to bleed and break. As to the choice of blank verse, Mr. Phillips was willing to dare humiliation; though he had so safely found and so securely maintained himself in the grave, melodious strains of *Christ in Hades* and *Marpessa* that he must have felt it safe to foot even the high altitudes that Shakespeare and Milton and Tennyson were wont to inhabit.

It is, indeed, a drama "wild with all regret." For moving power it deserves a place short only of the very great productions of its kind. One cannot help comparing parts of it with *Romeo and Juliet* and the most perfect passages in Tennyson's *Idylls of*

*the King*. The diction and phrasing of the poet at times give all but ultimate satisfaction. Only great poets are capable of frequent lines and images such as these:—

“The chime of mailèd feet,”

“The last sunset cry of wounded kings,”

“That human ending to night wind,”

“His kiss was on her lips ere she was born.”

But of course the real power of the poem resides in the intense passion that utters itself in such passages as those where the widowed and barren Lucrezia voices the woman's agonized cry of yearning for children and for love; where Francesca in guileless playfulness tests Paolo's armor to know if it be anywhere vulnerable, all the time sending through his unavailing armor of moral restraint shock after shock of delirious love to make “purple riot at his heart” and betray him finally to immortal peril; where the youthful pair move toward each other, drawn by an elemental passion that from the foundation of the world destined them for one another; and, finally, where the dark, intense Giovanni bows over the bier of the guilty young lovers, slain in the flower of their beauty by his hand who loved them best, and says:—

“Unwillingly

They loved, unwillingly I slew them. Now  
I kiss them on the forehead quietly.”

Such artistic handling of such emotions compels us to grant Mr. Phillips no mean place among the great poets whose function it has been through tragic representation to elevate and purify the mind with pity and fear.

The play is struck off with high fervor from beginning to end. From the first scene where Francesca in her fresh innocent beauty enters the gloomy hall of Malatesta, to the last, where, extended side by side on a single bier the lovers “look like children fast asleep,” the movement does not slacken; the emotional wave that has borne the reader steadily forward does not ebb. Once or twice only, where Marco and Mirva, Corrado and Tessa and Nita are introduced, is there any attempt to relieve the tension of interest and feeling by the interplay of lighter



passages. Here — while the author does not succeed very well when he thus sets aside the grave and impassioned manner that so well becomes him — he nevertheless makes skilful use of the artistic principle of contrast without disturbing the harmonious effect of the drama. The poem is rather a strong and graphic sketch than a painting in which perspective and background, color and outline combine to give the sense of solid reality. Shakespeare's dramas are perfect fragments torn from the canvas of life. They want neither light nor shade, neither grace nor substantiality. They are not thin and pale, but rich and full, so that after an attentive reading of one of his masterpieces one feels as if one had been submerged in a scene of actual life where there was no element of reality wanting. It is this lack of ability to lay in the low or neutral coloring of mean and humorous incident, side by side with the glowing hues of romance and heroism that compels us to assign to the dramas of Mr. Phillips a place far below that which critics by a universal verdict have given to the works of Shakespeare and his most gifted associates. In *Paola and Francesca* we do not perceive life in a multiplicity of relations; we do not feel a sense of its teeming and varied interests. But in depicting the more sombre and intense experiences of mankind — the concentrated love of an older for a younger brother, the insistent and jealous love of a mature woman who yearns for affection and motherhood, the sullen pride and power of the warrior who has formed the habit of victory, the heartbreak that comes to simple peasant maids who "love not wisely but too well," and the rapturous first love of ardent and generous youth — these primitive and common emotions the author treats with a passion, dignity, and restraint at once peculiar to himself and characteristic of all great poets and of all great art.

How high in the scale of poetic values to rank the emotions evoked by this tragedy it is not easy to say. Has it merely the charm of beauty and sensuous passion? Or does it arouse the imagination to nobler action, quicken and stimulate the moral life, and sound the note of parley from sunlit spiritual heights? Inherently, there is no reason why it might not have produced the highest emotional effects, yet it would be granting too

much to say that it has done this. The sentiments evoked are those of regret, compassion, awe; and one finds himself under the sway of just such feelings (as well as of others equally powerful) when he reads *Romola*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and the *Idylls of the King*. Yet I do not think that Mr. Phillips's work deserves to rank with these in emotional quality. In these productions there is an unobtrusive moral grandeur; a positive yet delicately artistic spiritual impulse, whereby beauty and truth are made to meet together, purity and art to kiss each other, and even sensuous passion induced somehow to clothe itself in the white radiance of righteousness. While there is never absent from Mr. Phillips's work that note of "high seriousness" that has come to be accepted as the requisite of all genuinely great literature, he lacks the ethical passion and the spiritual vision that distinguished the great Victorian poets.

No one will deny Mr. Phillips the title of poet. It would seem that in the initial and original gifts that go to the making of a poet, little was withheld from him. He has the poet's passion for beauty, the poet's vision, and in supreme measure the poet's power of expression. As much, almost, as Milton and Tennyson he has been nurtured in the atmosphere of beauty and poetry. He was born two miles from Oxford; his father, something of a poet himself, was, and still is, a canon of Peterborough Cathedral; his mother, by descent, claimed relationship with poets — with the poet Wordsworth, even — and she early communicated to the boy her own enthusiastic love of poetry. When he was a lad of fifteen at Arundel School he heard *Christabel* read; and from that moment he knew that he too was a poet, and he then began to write verse. While still young he came under the influence of Shelley and Keats and Tennyson. He told the writer how, as a boy at school, he would lie awake after he had gone to bed repeating aloud lines from Tennyson's *Morte d'Arthur* until the proctor would say: "Stop that, and go to sleep." He spent some months at Queen's College, Cambridge, but before the end of his first year joined the travelling company of Shakespearean players conducted by his cousin, Mr. Frank Benson. He remained with this company five or six years, playing Iago, Prospero, Brutus, the Ghost in

*Hamlet*, and Sir Andrew Aguecheek. Milton among English poets, and Vergil among Latin, exerted a dominating influence over him. It was under the stimulus of Milton's poetry that he began to acquire the technique that won such instant approval when revealed in *Christ in Hades*.

In these literary influences and preferences of his youth we have a clue to Mr. Phillips's lofty and individual style — particularly a hint that helps to account for the gravity, beauty, and elevation of his blank verse. He did not like the tumultuousness of Shakespeare and his associates. He has consciously cultivated the high and reserved style of Milton and Vergil. After the manner of the Greeks, he has sought to combine passion with restraint, to admit nothing extraneous, and to concentrate the passion and the action with severe singleness of purpose.

Whatever the shortcomings of Mr. Phillips as a poet, we may not say that they are due to unfortunate choice of subject-matter, or to inadequate knowledge of human nature. He knows human life; and, though for the most part he has chosen his themes from the past, and has been prone almost to the degree of morbidity toward the world of shame, or of shadows, yet he re-creates, humanizes, and poetizes whatever he sets his hand to. The doubt, and the pathos, and the mystery of life have made strong appeal to his imagination and his emotions; and he seems deeply imbued with a sense of the tragedy of weak and futile lives — lives unhappily nipped in the bud, or given over to cruel and hopeless shipwreck; yet he seems unprovided with any philosophy of life whereby weakness may be turned into strength, or redemptive goodness and power made to join hands with human folly and futility. One stanza of Wordsworth, or Tennyson, or Browning is worth all that he has ever written, by way of bracing men to do their duty or to meet their destiny. That he has seen with passionate sympathy and helpfulness into the lives of the poor, the ignorant, and the vicious, I am not at all sure. Nor am I sure that he takes account of the highest things as being of the highest moment. There is in all that he writes a strong fleshy tint. Not only are many of the epithets and images in his early poetry sensuous; they very frequently

appeal to the lower senses of smell, and taste, and touch; and in his two latest productions there is something too much of fleshliness.

What has deeply impressed the present writer, both in conversation with Mr. Phillips and in the reading of his poems, is a certain mental barrenness and inadequacy of moral aim. One gets the impression that Mr. Phillips's intellectual life is carried on from hand to mouth. He does not care for social and moral problems; he has no sharp interest in national or world concerns; no fixed habits of work or study; no connected philosophy of the universe; no passionate religious faith. The insistent moral and religious yearnings of the age seem scarcely to have invaded his heart or his thought. From anything that we can draw from his writings — except for the weak doctrine set forth in his latest book — he might as well have written in the time of Shakespeare, Milton, or Dryden, as at the close of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Indeed, it is in just this vital particular, I think, that those who have been waiting with an alert ear for a new voice to break the silence of the songless night that has of late settled down upon us have suffered the keenest disappointment. Many had hoped that this new singer was to catch up the spiritual strain of Milton, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning — the last notes of which are still almost vocal — and bear it upwards in still nobler bursts of harmony. But this, it is to be feared, is a vain hope.

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